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SUBJECT: BELGIAN MINISTERS VISIT DRC

Classified By: EPOLCOUNS RMEASON REASON 1.4(B)

1.(SBU) SUMMARY- Belgian Defense Minister (MoD) Pieter De Crem, Foreign Minister (FM) Karel Du Gucht, and Development Minister (DM) Charles Michel visited the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) from April 16-23, 2008. The visit, intended to show a unified approach by Belgium,s new coalition government (GOB) toward its former colony, made waves after DRC President Joseph Kabila characterized as "insulting" remarks by FM de Gucht regarding the need for peace, transparency, and democracy in the troubled nation. In Kinshasa, the Belgian visitors also raised the issue of transparency concerning a recent mining contracting between China and the DRC. DRC authorities asserted that they are a sovereign state and can sign contracts how they please. MOD De Crem also visited Kananga while De Gucht and Michel also traveled to Goma and Bukavu for a closer look at issues surrounding the civilian population including hospitals attempting to deal with victims of sexual violence.

12. (C) In a readout to western diplomats on April 29, senior MFA Belgian Africa specialists said the goals of the visit were threefold: to send a strong message of Belgian political unity to the DRC; to promote development, human rights, and transparency; and to reiterate Belgium,s support and engagement in the troubled eastern provinces of North and South Kivu. The MFA urged solidarity among western nations in working with Kinshasa to promote democracy and peace in the DRC. Belgium told diplomats that they had acted as "international spokespersons" for the positions of many European Union countries with which they had consulted before their trip. Stating that the DRC is "not a hopeless case." The MFA urged western solidarity toward the country. END SUMMARY

Ministers Discuss Defense, Political Cooperation, and Development

13. (SBU) On his first major trip as a national leader, Defense Minister Pieter De Crem focused his April 16-22 visit to the DRC on becoming informed about its on-the-ground situation and military issues, with an eye to focusing his visit on future military cooperation between the two countries. A highlight of his trip was the stop in Kananga, where Belgium has some 60 troops. Referring to several poorly-organized visits by his predecessor, Socialist MoD Andre Flahaut, De Crem acknowledged a previous lack of coordination between various Belgian ministries with regard to the DRC and promised "a better synergy between the Defense, Foreign Affairs, and Development ministries." "Belgium will, from now on, speak with one voice when it comes to involvement in Africa," he said.

14. (SBU) De Crem visited Congolese military bases, where he observed first-hand the Army's obsolete, often broken, equipment and the difficult living arrangements of soldiers and their families. He announced that Belgian military support would shift from an active humanitarian, peacekeeping role to one of logistical and medical support. Belgium has some 75 troops in DRC, among which six are in Kinshasa, 60 in Kananga, two in Bukavu and nine in the United Nations Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC). The shift would not reflect a decrease in overall monetary aid to Congo, but simply a shift to professional, especially medical, training and cooperation, he said. De Crem reiterated Belgium's willingness to station a rapid response force in the Congo to help quell future outbreaks of violence. He offered Belgian military to help train and reorganize the Congolese Forces as legitimate assimilated soldiers transformed from renegade rebel groups.

15. (SBU) Most Belgian and French media reports on the visits, from across the ideological spectrum, have noted that De Crem drew a mixed reaction during his visit to war-torn northern Kivu. One group of local officials was reported to have brushed aside the minister's discussion on defense issues, instead wanting to talk about Belgian methods for hog insemination. Some citizens expressed skepticism about the effectiveness of foreign military aid, recalling past maintenance problems with donated equipment. De Crem was shown Belgian trucks that were unable to run because of a lack of spare parts, gasoline, or both. De Crem referred to his visit as seeing "real Africa."

De Gucht Directly Addresses DRC Issues in Major Address

16. (SBU) After four days focused on defense issues, De Crem was joined in Kinshasa on April 20 by FM de Gucht and DM Michel. The meetings between Belgian and Congolese officials touched on a range of subjects and discussions described by the Belgian MFA in a readout to western diplomats on April 29 as "intense and animated." Briefers included Amb. Guy Trouveroy, Director for Sub-Saharan Africa; Amb. Jozef Smets, Senior Envoy for the Great Lakes; Amb. Koen Adam, DRC desk.

17. (SBU) In the major speech of the visit, FM de Gucht said on April 21 that Belgium considers peace, security, prosperity, and democracy as the priorities facing the DRC; with Congolese leaders addressing those issues through political and economic transparency> The leaders should ensure that agricultural and mineral products benefit the many (and not just the few), lead the fight against corruption, and support the growth of a responsible political opposition. De Gucht referred to an agronomist's estimate that the Congo had the capacity to feed two billion people if properly exploited. He noted the need to "attack the fabulous privileges of the few." Hailing the political capacity of the Congolese people, the FM stressed that freedom of political choice could make the nation a model throughout Africa. In their debrief, the MFA Africa experts named several personalities in whom they see increasing democratic leadership potential. These included: Abbe Malumalu, the presidents of the Senate and House, with whom De Gucht and Michel met, as well as leaders in some areas of the private sector whom they also met. The three ministers also held separate meetings with Congolese parliamentary leaders, government officials covering mining, transportation, and relations with the IMF, and with business leaders. MFA debriefers reported finding serious and competent interlocutors within parliament and the business community, for example, growth of the country (?), De Gucht's remarks clearly irritated Kabila, who responded through the media by calling for an end to the "slave-master relationship" between the two countries.

Chinese Mining Contract

18. (SBU) The MFA briefers said that a key area of sensitivity

between the two sides was the recent mining contract between China (the PRC) and the DRC. The details of the reported multi-billion dollar deal, which would accord DRC mining rights to Chinese firms, have been kept secret (in fact, in its readout sheet of the visit, the DRC Embassy in Brussels characterized de Gucht's inquiry into the matter as "simply indecent"). Stating that Belgium has "no problem" with the fact that the PRC has huge contracts in the DRC, the MFA focused its concern on lack of transparency in investment transactions that would make commitments covering much of Kinshasa's mineral wealth. In addition, the Belgians were concerned that these commitments were not tied to balancing the DRC's debt to the broader international community, not just to Belgium but also to the European Union and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Lacking any detailed knowledge of the deal, the MFA briefers continued, the IMF will be unable to judge how to treat DRC requests for easy terms from the international lending community. During the visit, Development Minister Michel expressed concern that the sudden, overwhelming influx of Chinese resources could undermine international aid structures.

¶9. (SBU) The Belgian debriefers expressed cautious optimism about the situation in eastern Congo based on the fact that the Goma and Nairobi processes remain on track. The MFA officials stressed the importance of international involvement as the Goma peace process moves forward. They praised the United Kingdom, Sweden, and the United States for their efforts in the region. They also cautioned against strikes targeting rebel groups, such as the FDLR, lest they take retribution against civilian populations.

¶10. (SBU) In their debrief, MFA officials acknowledged that comments made by the Belgian officials during the visit on human rights and corruption in the DRC as well as the slow pace of economic reform ruffled the feathers of some DRC Officials. The Belgian ministers emphasized that they were sending a strong message to the Congolese government about the need for future reforms. The Belgian MFA informed members of the diplomatic corps that the message carried to Kinshasa by FM de Gucht and the other ministers had been cleared by a number of its EU partners.

¶11. (C) COMMENT: The level of the delegation that Belgium sent to the DRC illustrates the importance Belgium places on stability and development in its former colony. Belgium clearly continues to feel a responsibility to its former charge, more than forty years after it was granted independence. Belgian concerns about the DRC are certainly heightened by Chinese maneuvers in a resource-rich part of the world. Belgium worries both about a potential loss of economic and commercial influence but also about the possibility that Chinese deals might weaken democracy-building in the DRC, reverse recent improvements in transparency, and return the country to the kleptocracies of years past.
Bush